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New holdings stretch FWP's budgets for weed control, sanitation, staffing thin

After acquisition

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After acquisition

By EVE BYRON Independent Record helenair.com | Posted: Sunday, January 16, 2011 12:00 am | (4) Comments

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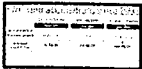
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FWP land acquisitions since 1993			
	Gov. Marc Racicot 1993-2000	Gov. Judy Martz 2001-2004	Gov. Brian Schweitzer 2005-2010
No. of acquisitions	35	52	51
Total acres acquired	28,838 acres	27,727 acres	232,035 acres
Total spent to acquire land	\$7,438,746	\$15,498,398	\$90,035,656

* Figures represent price paid for acquisition, not including other costs.
Source: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks



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In the past six years, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has used \$90 million from a variety of new and traditional sources and married it with landowner donations to acquire about 232,000 acres for state parks, wildlife management areas and fishing access sites.

Now the state agency faces the financial hardship of maintaining those and other properties it owns.

The land purchases during Gov. Brian Schweitzer's administration total almost four times what was bought by or given to FWP during the 12 years of the Marc Racicot and Judy Martz eras combined. From 1993 through 2004, FWP spent \$22.9 million on property, and with donated land acquired 56,000 acres. Those administrations also sold off 8,700 acres for \$523,650.

Altogether, using state and federal funds, money from hunting and fishing licenses and recreational fees, FWP has paid out \$113 million for property and acquired about 288,150 acres (including donated land) during that past 18 years, according to an Independent Record analysis.

"I suppose this administration will best be remembered for finding new opportunities for families to hunt, camp and fish," Schweitzer said Friday. "I'm proud that we have found the resources to fund land purchases that help Montana families."

Those acquisitions include large parcels, like the 27,000-acre Spotted Dog property near Avon for \$15 million and the 4,740-acre Fish Creek site west of Missoula for \$17 million. They also include dozens of smaller sites, including the 75-acre Stuckey Ridge parcel near Anaconda for \$265,000; the 37-acre Stipek fishing access site on the Yellowstone River north of Glendive for \$164,000; and the 1-acre Scotty Brown Bridge property, adjacent to the Blackfoot Clearwater Game Range, for \$97,000.

"I think it's important to note that we have a mix of the kinds of purchases we made," Schweitzer said. "In many cases, like when we purchase fishing access sites, they're not large pieces of land but are critical pieces of land so more people can access our rivers. And in some cases, they are small and medium size purchases that create conduits to much larger pieces of public land for public recreation."

FWP Director Joe Maurier said a unique set of circumstances has allowed his agency to buy the properties — Plum Creek Timber Co. sold off hundreds of thousands of acres, including land near the federally owned Bob Marshall and Scapegoat wilderness areas; the 2007 Montana Legislature approved dedicating \$10 million in general funds for property acquisition through the Access Montana program; and three new federal habitat programs, started in the mid 2000s, have provided FWP with around \$30 million to purchase wildlife habitat.

"We could leverage money and had built up some reserves, then had an opportunity that came up with some conservation groups ... and the stars aligned," Maurier said.

Yet, now that FWP owns 348,700 acres across Montana in 72 wildlife management areas, 44,000 acres in 53 state parks, and almost 21,000 acres at more than 320 fishing access sites, the budgets for weed control, sanitation and staffing are stretched thin. The head of the FWP Parks Division, Chas Van Genderen, recently told the FWP Commission that his division is in a "terrible fiscal situation" and asked for permission to raise fees at some of the state parks. The commission refused the request last month, citing the national economic downturn.

Maurier said he doesn't have a dollar figure for the maintenance backlog, and while he agrees that the state parks system isn't adequately funded, he downplays concerns that maintenance is overwhelming and strongly defends the purchases.

"Our philosophy in going into this whole thing was that where we had good opportunities that weren't just throwing money away, for places where we really needed access — special places — that we would act now and at the very worst case we might have to mothball them awhile to do necessary things to open them to the public," Maurier said.

A report by the Legislative Fiscal Division adds that it's often difficult to determine what has been spent on maintenance for FWP lands due to a variety of accounting practices.

"For example, to determine how much has been spent on weed control statewide, the amount expended on supplies or contracts can be isolated, but not often the corresponding personal services costs," the report states. "However, expenditures are not an adequate means to measure weed control activities, as paying for weed control and actually controlling weeds are two different things."

Under a 2009 statute, money for maintenance has to be included in the purchase price. But the statute expires in 2013, and the fiscal division report adds that the active land purchasing by FWP, coupled with the relatively flat figures set aside for maintenance, creates "an imbalance between the amount available for maintenance and the requirements of the expanding system."

In the Parks Division alone, while the total fund balance remained positive, expenditures exceeded revenues by \$1.4 million in fiscal year 2008, and by \$755,000 in 2009, reducing the fund balance by \$2.1 million. Those expenses aren't tied to any one line item, but the trend is expected to continue unless changes are made.

Maurier said they're asking the Legislature for permission to increase the voluntary fee people pay when they license their vehicles from \$4 to \$6. The governor's biennial budget proposal also includes an increase of 4.8 percent for the state agency, from \$140 million to \$146 million, but the money isn't necessarily dedicated to maintenance.

In these tight fiscal times, Republican legislators have asked departments to cut their budgets by 5 percent; the impact may not be as great in the FWP Department since it typically doesn't receive general fund money. Most of its budget comes from license and recreational fees, federal funds and the state bed tax.

Maurier said FWP may have to delay opening some sites and continue to defer maintenance elsewhere until the system catches up with itself.

"We'll do the best we can and eventually everything will be open," Maurier said. "Our parks system is not funded very well so we are going to see if people are willing to pay a little more."

At a recent natural resources subcommittee meeting, Barbara Smith with the Legislative Fiscal Division added that the "lack of balance for acquisition and management of land" has been an issue for at least the past three sessions, and continues today.

"We have had a lot of requests to look at state land purchases," Smith said, adding that the queries include land bought by other state agencies too. "It's a series of issues — what should the state hold, what should FWP hold, what is the relationship with trust lands and who controls the acquisitions."

While Maurier and his staff can recommend buying land, those property purchases or donations need the approval of the five-member FWP Commission. Those involving more than 100 acres or \$100,000 in value also need the go-ahead from the five-member State Land Board.

Since the Legislature last met in 2009, the Legislative Fiscal Division identified maintenance of FWP lands for public safety, resource protection and facility performance as a critical goal for the agency during the next two years. However, the division also pointed out that proposed budget cuts could result in reduced grants to local communities for trail maintenance, as well as delayed maintenance activities in state parks and fishing access sites.

With more than \$15 million in donated land lowering the average cost to about \$392 an acre, no one is accusing FWP of any malfeasance. In fact, many conservation and sporting groups applaud the purchases and work with FWP to increase state holdings.

"I think the state has been thoughtful in their purchases; it's not like they're just buying land anywhere," said Kat Imhoff, state director of The Nature Conservancy. Her organization purchased many of the Plum Creek Timber Co. lands and held them until state or federal agencies found the money to buy them, or they were sold to adjacent landowners with some restrictions.

"Folks from community groups were so concerned about losing access they had for so long from Plum Creek, and that's a huge driver for the state," Imhoff said. "This is impressive in terms of making opportunities for future generations."

But state Sen. John Brenden, R-Scobey, a former rancher who previously was an FWP commissioner, is asking pointed questions about land purchases and maintenance.

"How much is enough? If we can't manage what we have, why do we keep buying land, especially in this economy?" Brenden said. "Then as a rancher, I'm bidding against myself as a taxpayer. It's unfair competition."

"... I want to make things work, not kill FWP, but they need to control their spending. It's easy to spend other people's money."

Maurier has heard the arguments before, but said that during the past two years he's been at the FWP helm, people throughout Montana have told him their No. 1 priority is access to hunting, fishing and recreational areas.

"The bottom line is this land belongs to all Montanans, to our grandchildren and the children that are yet to be born," Maurier said. "We can have a philosophical debate about whether the government owning land is appropriate or not ... but we have decided this is important to do, and we're stretching our funding by buying at the low end of the market, with tough bargaining and maximizing federal dollars."

Maurier said FWP pays taxes on the land, and recently dropped the Parker Homestead as a state park because it was too small to provide many opportunities for the public. But while some legislators have pushed for "no net gains" in state lands, he said the outcry is overwhelming whenever his agency tries to sell off some of the isolated, smaller parcels.

"When the commission attempted to do that a few years ago, there was a huge push back from constituents not wanting to give up any land regardless," Maurier said. "I think you would face that same sentiment today, although I'm willing to look at that."

He noted that on the average, 243,000 people hold hunting licenses and 391,000 people have fishing licenses. State parks have recorded about 2 million visitors annually, and a 2010 economic impact study recently released reported that nonresidents who visited state parks contributed \$122 million to Montana's economy and produced 1,600 jobs last year.

"We have made some remarkable investments for the sportsmen of Montana," Maurier said. "Most important is the Plum Creek land, which is prime habitat for a variety of species and can serve as connecting corridors, which are critical for any (grizzly bear and wolf) delisting opportunities down the road. It preserves public access to those places where we've had it for years that we were going to lose."

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